

# The Cultural Revolution Through the Prism of Vernacular Photography

Marine Cabos

Volume 8, Issue 1: *Art and Vernacular Photographies in Asia*, Fall 2017

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0008.107> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0008.107>]



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000001/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig.1. Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, December 1966. © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive

The sun casts a bright light on a man standing proudly in front of the Gate of the Heavenly Peace, located at the edge of Tian'anmen Square in Beijing (figure 1). Adorned with an armband, his left hand holds a small book; his right arm is hidden behind his back. The quietness of his face contrasts with the agitated crowd in the background. On the right side, a banner reads THE GREAT PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION (*Wenhua Dageming*, 文化大革命), which prompts the viewer to assume that this picture could not have been taken

before June 1966, when the leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) launched his directive calling on the Chinese people to return to revolutionary attitudes and rid society of “members of the bourgeoisie threatening to seize political power from the proletariat” — marking the start of violent class struggle. The inscription written in the white margin at the bottom corroborates this assumption. This souvenir picture was taken on December 1966 in Tian’anmen. Originally in black and white, some parts are hand-coloured, in a rather clumsy manner, in red or yellow.

This portrait of an unknown individual taken by an unknown photographer is set within the framework of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and participates in what is now commonly termed vernacular photography. Deriving from the Latin *verna* (slave), the word *vernacular* by extension relates to what is useful for human activity. Applied to our subject, vernacular photographs can be conceived as the type of ordinary visual records that do not fit within the public or art circles, but rather remain for private or personal use. Vernacular photographs are “the ones made or bought by everyday folk,” the ones “pushed to the margins” because they are considered as subsidiary to the photographic production publically diffused. [1],[#N1] The term encompasses all types of *domestic* and *utilitarian* photographs, ranging from medical to military views, from visual reports to scientific records, and from professional studios or photo-booth portraits to amateur snapshots found in family albums. In other words, vernacular photographs are not originally destined to be widely seen.

This type of image is a rather new topic for academic research, as most of the studies on the history of photography have not examined such materials before the 1990s. Today, both artists and scholars have been paying increasing attention to vernacular practices because they now represent the greater part of the production in the history of photography. [2],[#N2]

Echoing recent scholarly desire to re-collect China’s past through visual material, this essay intends to illuminate another side of the story by looking at 1960s–70s studio portraits assembled in the archive of the French collector and artist Thomas Sauvin, who has been gathering vernacular prints found directly in China over the last decade. Sauvin embarked on this massive project in 2009, when he began to salvage discarded negatives from a recycling plant on the edge of Beijing and to acquire a wide variety of prints and albums he found at flea markets and on the Internet. Today his collection incorporates more than half a million images and has been an excellent resource for the history of amateur photography in the second half of the twentieth century in China.

Methodologically, I propose a close visual examination of some one hundred photographs from Sauvin’s archive that are clearly dated and produced by professional studios. In fact, after scrutinizing all dated photographs taken between 1966 and 1976, I realized that the majority of them were made in studios: they either bore studios’ names or were obviously staged in typical studio settings.

By examining a selection of Sauvin’s archive, I am conscious of the fact that the collector’s agenda is a constituent part of any archive. For this reason, the photographs I present are not examined for their historical significance; rather, the goal is to delineate a framework for understanding the variety and functions of photographs produced during a decade that left very few (and those that remain are rare) visual records. How does this collection of vernacular pictures — amassed by a contemporary foreigner — enable us to think about — and think with — the scope of photographic practices during this period of dramatic social, cultural, and political change?

## Ecologies of Photographic Practices in 1960s China

Vernacular photography fits within a broader framework that seems worth reconstituting briefly. Who were the main actors and what was at stake? From the advent of the People’s Republic of China, in 1949, photography had become one of the key tools to encourage a nationalist fervor across the country. Still the few operators who had access to cameras at that time were government-appointed photojournalists, as well as a small quantity of Western diplomats, soldiers, and photojournalists who usually accompanied diplomatic missions. That is to say, under the Maoist regime, China was visualized primarily by photographers working for the government.

The 1960s inherited the late-1950s institutionalization of the photography industry, whose overall functioning became largely state-operated. All photographic activity took place under the jurisdiction of the Xinhua News Agency (*Xinhua tongxunshe*, 新华通讯社), the state-owned organ of mass communication that commissioned photographers to work for major newspapers, such as the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*, 人民日报). Local newspapers provided staff photographers a limited quota of cameras and rolls of film, and ordered them to destroy their negatives once the images were published. In addition to newspapers, photographs were circulated in a variety of illustrated publications that were distributed through the state-owned channel Xinhua Bookstore (*Xinhua Shudian*, 新华书店), which mainly enriched public libraries and schools, as such publications remained unaffordable to the masses. [3].[#N3]

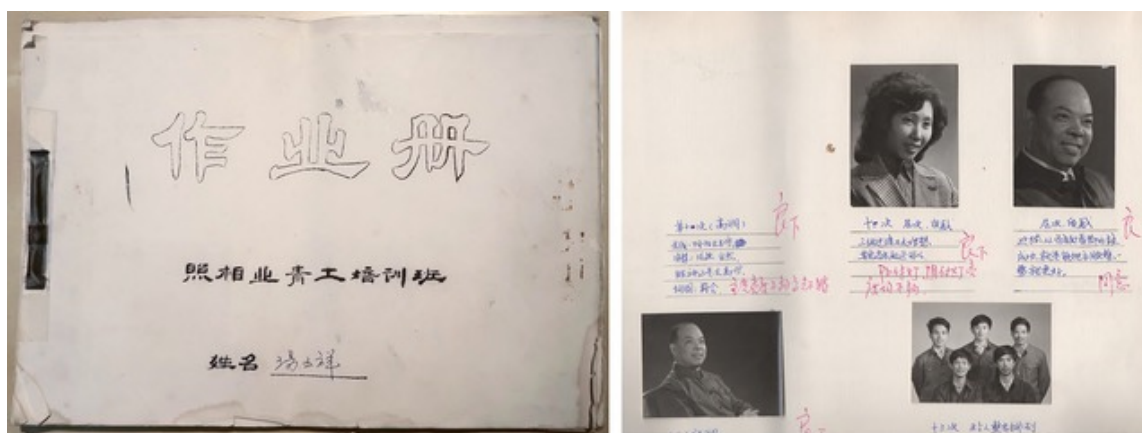
This era also established a new generation of trained photographers. Before, there was no such thing as a photography school or training; only independent amateur clubs and manuals provided support, and only to a certain extent, to people interested in photography. In order to answer the state demands for photography's technical efficiency and rapid productivity, the Communist Party decided to reinforce photography training by launching several organizations. Among the first was the Association of Chinese Photography (ACP), formed in 1956 and later known as the China Photography Academy. This organization merged the many regional and provincial associations of local clubs in order to "provide trainings to photographers, and promote the development and prosperity of the Chinese photographic cause." [4].[#N4]. Testimonies indicate that photographers could also emerge from other backgrounds, such as cinema studies. The photojournalist Li Zhensheng 李振盛 (b. 1940), for example, studied photography at Changchun School of Cinema, where he was "exposed to a massive dose of Soviet films and pictures from the Soviet art photography." [5].[#N5]

Whereas the detailed training program of Chinese photographers remains unclear, the basic training seemed to have emphasized the mastery of techniques. For instance, Sauvin's archive holds an exercise book, dating back to 1972 and 1973, which begins with a technical explanation of how to use color film (figure 2). The rest of the exercise book is a succession of original pasted-in, small-size photographs with handwritten notes that give further information about the weather, how much the diaphragm was open, the shutter speed, the time when the photograph was taken, and the season. Similar exercise albums from later periods (1980s) with both the photographer and the teacher's handwriting are held in Sauvin's archive (figure 3).



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000002/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 2. Photography training manual, 1972 and 1973. © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000003/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 3. Homework album, inside inscription date: 6 January 1983. © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive

It has been correctly argued that documenting photographers of the Chinese Communist Party is an arduous task because historical documents produced under the Maoist regime are generally kept away from researchers. [6]. Despite the paucity of contextual information, some of them — such as Li Zhensheng, Meng Zhaohui 孟昭瑞, Weng Naiqiang 翁乃强 (figure 4), and Zhang Yaxin 张雅心, famous for his portrayals of the new form of revolutionary theatrical performance called model operas (*yangbanxi*, 样板戏), which superseded the traditional Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution — are fairly well known.

Government-appointed photographers were encouraged to elaborate on specific visual strategies: clean and legible compositions, *mises-en-scène* with dramatic lighting and bright colors, integration of photographs into narratives, and preference given to symbolic themes. Dictated by the Communist Party, these visual codes aimed at forging a national consciousness and motivating people to participate in nation-building efforts. The official photographic production of the Cultural Revolution propagated an array of exuberant portrayals of everyday heroes, bountiful harvests, and deified images of Mao, all creating a distinct iconography. This period indeed marked a shift in the cult of Mao, as he became increasingly concerned about the control of his image and his constantly changing political circle. Consequently, the types of photographs publicly disseminated were not what we might consider authentic depictions of social life. The tendency to politicize visual culture drove the creation of “standard” positive images, those that glorified Communist values.





[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000004/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 4. Weng Naiqiang, Scene in the Northeast Heilongjiang province where the educated youth responded to Chairman Mao's call to work in the mountain areas and countryside to be re-educated by the poor and lower-middle-class peasants, 1968, © Weng Naiqian, courtesy of the artist and 798 Photo Gallery, Beijing.*

## The Other Face of the Cultural Revolution

By bringing together hitherto isolated bodies of material dating back to the 1960s and '70s, Sauvin's archive divulges alternative photographic practices that existed alongside the work of state-appointed photojournalists. In fact, images of the Cultural Revolution were not merely about revolutionary heroes, the glorification of revolutionary youth down in the countryside, and public gatherings or parades, but there were also family and souvenir pictures made by professional studios. Camera owners were very scarce and there is no doubt that most people could not afford to commission a professional studio to take their portrait. Still, surviving archives, including Sauvin's, attest to the fact that studios maintained active production throughout the late 1960s and 1970s.

Surviving materials validate the existence of a number of professional studios active in several cities at that time of the People's Republic of China. Among many, many others were the Beijing People's Photographic Studio (*Beijing renmin zhaoxiang*, 北京人民照相), the Eternally Red Studio (*Yong hong zhaoxiang*, 永红照相), the Torch Studio of Beijing (*Beijing huoju*, 北京火炬), the Lofty Light Studio (*Chongguang zhaoxiang*, 崇光照相), the Happiness Studio (*Xingfu zhaoxiang*, 幸福照相), the Red Capital Studio (*Hongdou zhaoxiang*, 红都照相), the Daqing Road Studio, in Qingdao (*Daqing zhaoxiangguan*, 大庆路照相馆), and the Red City Studio (*Hongcheng zhaoxiang*, 红城照相).

All supplied a variety of clients with souvenir pictures for personal consumption. Their services encompassed the production of single and group portraits, but they also produced "fine-art" photos (*meishu zhaoxiang*, 美术照相), whose aesthetics were borrowed from Chinese pictorial tradition, suggesting the possibility to add color (*zhaose*, 着色), to reproduce (*fanpai*, 翻拍), to develop and print (*chongshai*, 冲晒), and to take photographs outside the studio (*waipai*, 外拍).

If we were to attempt a visual categorization of dated studio photographs based on Sauvin's archive, we would notice several trends with specific characteristics and minimal changes over time.

A majority of his archive consists of portraits made inside the studios, images that play around a variety of *mise-en-scènes*. The encounter between portrait photography and the Chinese audience dated back to the arrival of the medium in the 1840s. Often regarded as a "major specialty of Chinese photographers," portraiture represented a chief part of studios' income in the second half of the nineteenth century. [7]. [N7]. This popular genre underwent continuous development. To some extent, portraits made during the People's Republic of China became part of this lineage by continuing the tradition of commemorative portraits to be kept in someone's home.

The simplest versions were portraits above the chest or in full-length in black and white, in which the individual stood against a blank background (figures 5–8). Such prints could also be hand-tinted in a more or less sophisticated way: the photographs of infants celebrating their hundred days after birth (*bairi*, 百日), for example, and their one full year of life (*zhousui*, 周岁) (figures 9–12). Contrasting significantly with the blank background, other portraits show a painted backdrop that often represented a panoramic landscape, either natural or urban, or revolutionary symbols (figures 13–16). These ranged from naturalistic to more schematic depictions. In both cases, it offered an additional surface onto which the photographer could add colors. This type of painted backdrop had been used by professional studios since the second half of the nineteenth century.



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000005/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 5. Offered as gift, 1966 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin  
Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000006/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 6. From high school, 23 September 1968 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000007/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 7. Tianjin Hongyan, 1973 ©  
Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin  
Archive*





[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000008/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 8. Fuxing Studio, 1976 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000009/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 9. 23 May 1966 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000010/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 10. Yan Hong's first year, 31 September 1969 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000011/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 11. One hundred days, 4 July 1971 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*





[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000012/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 12. One hundred days, 2 September 1974 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000013/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 13. Back handwriting reads "Gift for my comrade-in-arms Li Cairen," 25 February 1967 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000014/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 14. Back handwriting reads "Gift for my cousin Cun Long, 25 December 1967, signed Shun Zao" © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000015/1?  
subview=detail;view=entry](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000015/1?subview=detail;view=entry)]

*Fig. 15. Back handwriting reads "1970" © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*





[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000016/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 16. Shanhaiguan [location near the Great Wall], 22 February 1975 ©  
Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*

Similar visual characteristics applied to group studio portraits, which ranged rather equally over time from group portraits of family members, to those of work colleagues, to those of army and sports comrades (figures 17–22). In the early development of the Cultural Revolution, conventional group portraits of young Red Guards were represented in standing position, holding pistols, and wearing different accessories (armband, cap) depending on their rank and role (figure 23). Other instances of such portrayal have been unearthed in one album currently held in the rich collection of the curator and editor Timothy Prus, who since 1992 has been presiding over a large collection of vernacular photographs called *The Archive of Modern Conflict* (figure 24).



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000017/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 17. 30 September 1966 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000018/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 18. Group portrait of young Communists working in a factory, dated 12 January 1967 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000019/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 19. Group portrait, 1967 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*





[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000020/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 20. 1 May 1973 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*





[[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000021/1?  
subview=detail;view=entry](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000021/1?subview=detail;view=entry)]

*Fig. 21. Beidahe seashore, 1973 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000022/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 22. Chengdu Studio, April 1976 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000023/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 23. "In union there is strength," 12 September 1968 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000024/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 24. Three reproductions of photographs showing single and group portraits of the “verbal attack and armed” staff, from an album entitled “Material of illegal and entrusted destructions in Lishi county [Shanxi province],” 1969, page 49. Courtesy of Archive of Modern Conflict.

Studio photographers were not constrained to stay indoors. It was also customary for subjects to be portrayed in locations filled with symbolic cultural and/or ideological meanings. For example, people were portrayed in front of traditional scenic spots (such as the Temple of Heaven and Beihai Park in Beijing) and newer sites linked to urban achievements or remodeling, such as the Gate of the Heavenly Peace in Tian’anmen or the Wuhan Yangtze Great Bridge.

If representations of scenic attractions have a long history in China, it was by no mean an innocent procedure to have one’s portrait made in front of Tian’anmen or Wuhan Yangtze Great Bridge (figure 25). [8],[#N8] Since the late 1950s, the Communist Party endeavored to commission photographic surveys of industrial, agricultural, and urban achievements initiated after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The Wuhan Great Bridge — sometimes referred to as the First Bridge of the Yangtze River — was one of these great achievements. Completed in 1957, it became a symbol of the collaboration between Chinese and Soviet engineers, legitimized by Mao’s inspection that same year. As for Tian’anmen, this square was enlarged and surrounded by ten new large buildings in 1958, while Mao launched the Great Leap Forward (1959–61). [9],[#N9] Besides visiting the Red Guards eight times in Tian’anmen during the Cultural Revolution, Mao turned the square into a site of Communist pilgrimage, to which family members from all of China should pay a visit at least once in their life. [10],[#N10] Consequently, single or family portraits taken in Tian’anmen Square were strong visual threads running through the period (figures 26–32).





[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000025/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 25.* "Throw a bridge across the river and natural barriers are surmounted and become thoroughfares," from Mao's poem, written in June 1956, entitled "Shuidiao Getou — Swimming," based on the eponymous traditional Chinese melody. © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive



[[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000026/1?  
subview=detail;view=entry](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000026/1?subview=detail;view=entry)]

*Fig. 26. Tian'anmen, Beijing, 1967 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000027/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 27. Tian'anmen, Beijing, 1968 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000028/1?  
subview=detail;view=entry](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000028/1?subview=detail;view=entry)]

*Fig. 28. Tian'anmen, Beijing, 1968 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*





[[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000029/1?  
subview=detail;view=entry](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000029/1?subview=detail;view=entry)]

*Fig. 29. Tian'anmen, Beijing, April 1969 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000030/1?  
subview=detail;view=entry](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000030/1?subview=detail;view=entry)]

*Fig. 30. Tian'anmen, Beijing, November 1970 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin  
Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000031/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 31. Tian'anmen, Beijing, National Day, 1971 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000032/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 32. Tian'anmen, Beijing, New Year, February 1976 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*

Although it seems difficult to delineate significant shifts in imagery based solely on the dated pictures from Sauvin's collection, some changes are noticeable over time, such as the slight increase in numbers of images by the 1970s and the range of clothing style, notably for women.

"Maoist China has been known for its advocacy of a simple, revolutionary appearance." [11]. [N11] If clothing differentiated "the socialist elect from the rest," gender differentiation was not clearly manifest in clothing during the 1960s and 1970s. [12]. [N12] Images in state-sponsored media and cultural products widely sent out a rather androgynous image of women, who ought to symbolize the fruits of the revolution by freeing themselves from self-adornment and embracing political correctness. In order to position themselves in such ideological discourse, women tended to avoid revealing the shape of their bodies, and wore short hair and clothes very similar to those of men. Only slight variations in clothing distinguished women from men: "Women's trousers were fastened at the side; men's at the front. Women's hair was bobbed; men's shaved at the neck." [13]. [N13]

We need to be cautious in asserting the absolute "masculinization" of women during the Cultural Revolution, however, as it has been argued that attitudes toward feminine beauty were more complex and, actually, always present even in the revolutionary process. [14]. [N14] And photographs held in Sauvin's archive seem to corroborate this argument by showing us that clothing styles for women in this period were not as rigid as we



may think. As an illustration, the family portrait taken in front of today's Beihai Park in Beijing attests to the fact that women could move beyond the working suit by wearing skirts as early as 1967 (figure 33). On the other hand, although women in skirts appear at both the beginning and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the wedding souvenir picture below (figure 34) demonstrates that the non-differentiation of gender was still present in 1975.



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000033/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 33. Souvenir of the Worker-Peasant-Soldier [Beihai] Park in Beijing 1967 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000034/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 34. Wedding souvenir picture (jiehun nian, 结婚念), 20 May 1975 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000035/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 34. Wedding souvenir picture (jiehun nian, 结婚念), 20 May 1975 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*

Figs. 35 to 39, examples of full-length (*quanshen*, 全身) portraits that shed light on clothing styles:



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000035/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 35. "Mao waves his hands [and] I move forward," 28 November 1968 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*





[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000036/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 36. November 1969 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000037/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 37. Dated 1973 © Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000038/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

*Fig. 38. Tianjin Zhonghua, 1975 ©  
Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin  
Archive*



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0008.107-00000039/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 39. Youzhen studio, Beijing, 1976  
© Beijing Silvermine / Thomas Sauvin  
Archive

Overall, the shared function of all these studio portraits was commemorative. Souvenir pictures (*liuying* or *liunian*, 留影 or 留念) celebrated a specific moment: an anniversary, a wedding, a place visited, a gathering, a professional or sport achievement, perhaps. It was rather common to write on the front and/or back of the image. In fact, such images were often offered as gifts to comrades-in-arms, friends, and family members, as the handwriting on the back of so many of the photographs reveals.

From a technical perspective, too, these studio portraits have several similarities. They were generally small in size and thus, presumably, affordable. Frequently, their edges were cut with serrated scissors to create a decorative frame, with a white margin on one side for space to write the studio name and possible some personal writing. It seems that throughout the decade both color and black and white were utilized. Further research is required to identify the accurate photography processing generally used by studios, but it seems that a majority of studio photographs were gelatin silver prints on different type of papers. For example, Sauvin's archive contains a fair number of portraits printed on an embossed-surface texture known as "silk surface." [15].[#N15]



Despite their original private use, these studio portraits unveil the mediation of national politics in vernacular photography. If visual conventions differed between vernacular private photos and official photographic production, there is still an observable connection between the reality of the photographic moment and the ideological discourses that infused the photographs. Personal narratives seemed to intertwine with “collective future-oriented struggle.”<sup>[16]</sup><sup>[#N16]</sup> This ideological takeover was particularly noticeable when Mao’s quotations were written in the margin of private photos. In that sense, studio portraits and the concomitant production of “official” photographs appear both to give prominence to techniques of standardizing and idealizing everyday life. To some extent, any photograph created during the Cultural Revolution eventually created images that “originated in life but higher than life,” to borrow the words of Chen Shilin, a photographer and beautifier of Mao’s images.<sup>[17]</sup><sup>[#N17]</sup>

## Conclusion

Why are these photos appearing now, little by little, when they had been hidden or discarded? If some images of the Cultural Revolution are now more familiar, thanks notably to popular publications such as *Zhiqing Old Photos* (published in the late 1990s), it is worth remembering that during these ten tumultuous years, the country underwent massive sociopolitical upheaval that saw countless individuals driven to their death and cultural relics and artifacts destroyed.<sup>[18]</sup><sup>[#N18]</sup> Family valuables were regarded as old and bourgeois symbols to get rid of, and photographs belonged to this category of dangerous possessions. Those who came to be known as the Red Guards forced people, and sometimes their own family members, to destroy such possessions. The Cultural Revolution’s wide-ranging effects permanently changed Chinese society, and had a significant impact on Chinese visual history by erasing much of it from public archives.

There are, in fact, many other photographs taken during the Cultural Revolution, kept in private or institutional hands, which have not yet been released. The current wave of digitization and enthusiastic research, along with the flourishing market for photography, will perhaps little by little open new doors and improve our understanding about this turbulent decade, well anchored in collective memory.

*Marine Cabos is an art historian who specializes in the history of photography in China. She received her PhD in the history of art from the University of London (SOAS). In 2011, she launched, and continues to administer “Photography of China” (photographyofchina.com), a curatorial platform whose goal is to present photographic material related to China.*

## Notes

1. Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” in *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), 57, 58.<sup>♣</sup><sup>[#N1-pt1]</sup>
2. Clément Cheiroux, *Vernaculaires: Essais d’histoire de la photographie* (Cherbourg-Octeville: Le Point du jour, 2013), 10–13, 21.<sup>♣</sup><sup>[#N2-pt1]</sup>
3. Martin Parr and Zheng Gu, *The Chinese Photobook: From the 1900s to the Present* [Zhongguo sheying shu ji, 中国摄影书集] (New York: Aperture, 2015), chapters 4 and 5.<sup>♣</sup><sup>[#N3-pt1]</sup>
4. Parr and Gu, *The Chinese Photobook*, 170.<sup>♣</sup><sup>[#N4-pt1]</sup>
5. Li, Zhensheng, *Winds and Clouds* [Feng Yun Sui Yue 风云岁月] (Washington, DC: International Publishing House for China’s Culture, 2012), 111.<sup>♣</sup><sup>[#N5-pt1]</sup>
6. Zhou Dengyang and Shi Zhimin, “Ranyin Fa: Photography and the Appropriation of Kodak Dye Transfer in Socialist China,” in *Trans Asia Photography Review*, vol. 7, no. 2 (spring 2017), accessed April 10, 2017.<sup>♣</sup><sup>[#N6-pt1]</sup>
7. Jonathan Hay, “Notes on Chinese Photography and Advertising in Late-19th-Century Shanghai,” in *Visual Culture in Shanghai 1850s–1930s*, ed. Jason C. Kuo (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007), 103.<sup>♣</sup><sup>[#N7-pt1]</sup>
8. Representations of scenic spots can be traced back to primary sources such as Chinese local gazetteers (difang zhi, 地方), which were cumulative records of an area that often offered illustrations and lists of must-see spots. This distinct literary genre was established sometime in the Song Dynasty (960–1279),

- though it originated from the older Zhou Dynasty's (c. 1045–256 BCE) requirements to submit geographical information to the central government. See Joseph Dennis, *Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China, 1100–1700* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2015), 22–24; James M. Hargett, "Song Dynasty Local Gazetteers and Their Place in the History of Difangzhi Writing," in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 56.2 (1996): 405–42. [↗](#) [\[#N8-ptr1\]](#)
9. Movement launched by the Communist Party to accelerated significantly agricultural and industrial productivity from collectivization. It resulted in a collapse of grain production, thus engendering a widespread famine in China. For an update study on the topic, see Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, "The Great Leap Forward: Anatomy of a Central Planning Disaster," in *Journal of Political Economy* 113, no. 4 (2005): 840–77. [↗](#) [\[#N9-ptr1\]](#)
  10. Claire Roberts, *Photography and China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 114. [↗](#) [\[#N10-ptr1\]](#)
  11. Hung-Yok Ip, "Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture," in *Modern China* 29, no. 3 (2003): 350. [↗](#) [\[#N11-ptr1\]](#)
  12. Antonia Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?: A National Problem," in *Modern China* 22, no. 2 (1996): 100, 122. [↗](#) [\[#N12-ptr1\]](#)
  13. Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?," 122. [↗](#) [\[#N13-ptr1\]](#)
  14. Ip, "Fashioning Appearances," 330–31, 351. [↗](#) [\[#N14-ptr1\]](#)
  15. "Silver Gelatin (Silk Surface)," in *Graphic Atlas*, accessed April 23, 2017, [http://www.graphicsatlas.org/identification/?process\\_id=303](http://www.graphicsatlas.org/identification/?process_id=303) [[http://www.graphicsatlas.org/identification/?process\\_id=303](http://www.graphicsatlas.org/identification/?process_id=303)]. [↗](#) [\[#N15-ptr1\]](#)
  16. David J. Davies, "Old Zhiqing Photos: Nostalgia and the 'Spirit' of the Cultural Revolution," in *China Review* 5, no. 2 (2005): 106; 117. [↗](#) [\[#N16-ptr1\]](#)
  17. Wu Hung, *Zooming In: Histories of Photography in China* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016), 205. [↗](#) [\[#N17-ptr1\]](#)
  18. Davies, "Old Zhiqing Photos," 97–123. [↗](#) [\[#N18-ptr1\]](#)

---

Trans-Asia Photography Review is published by [Hampshire College](#)  
 in collaboration with [Michigan Publishing](#), with support from the [Five College Consortium](#).  
 For more information please contact [mupub-help@umich.edu](mailto:mupub-help@umich.edu).  
 Online ISSN: 2158-2025